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Yet another cancer 'risk'—the nickel?

By Roger Boye

COINS COULD BE harmful to your health, warn several researchers who have been testing the metal nickel that is currently used in all United States coins except the cent.

Most of these experts agree that some people are allergic to the nickel in coins, and a few researchers, citing admittedly incomplete evidence, suggest that nickel in coins could cause cancer.

The results of some studies involving nickel were presented to a congressional committee late last month by Milton L. Selker, a consultant to Gould, Inc., an Ohio company that develops and manufactures metal products.

Selker had more than just humanitarian reasons for criticizing the use of nickel in coins. He was trying to convince the committee that the proposed small-sized dollar coin should be made out of titanium, a metal that his company has researched rather than the same copper-nickel clad composition used in the dime, quarter, and half dollar. A titanium dollar would weigh about half of a copper-nickel dollar and would have a "pleasing silver luster," he said. However, titanium would cause technical problems in the minting process and has other less desirable qualities.

Nevertheless, Selker put together a convincing argument that minute quantities of nickel can be absorbed by the skin from coins, and that the nickel can cause skin irritation, itching, and swelling. In short, some—perhaps many—people should avoid prolonged contact with coins.

Less convincing was Selker's statement that nickel in coins could cause cancer, a statement made after he told the committee, "I certainly don't have all the answers; I'm only raising questions."

His prepared testimony included information on two studies indicating that nickel dust causes nasal and lung cancer, and that rats develop cancerous tumors after dimes are placed in their abdomens.

A top executive of the Bureau of the Mint, Alan J. Goldman, admitted to the committee that "some people have a dermatitis (skin irritation) problem with nickel," although he added that nickel has been blamed for skin problems caused by other agents. He also tried to refute charges that the nickel in coins causes cancer.

"There is no scientific evidence showing that the metal in United States coins is any more carcinogenic (cancer causing) than other materials that could be used for coins," he said, quoting the finding of a researcher. He also reminded the committee members that the nickel in coins is solid, not dust, and suggested that most of the wear on coins is caused by high-speed coin-counting machines, not by skin contact.